

Grading 2.0

Online programs that are the high-tech equivalent of a teacher's grade book are the latest tools to help parents stay on top of their child's classwork. The majority of schools in the U.S. now have student management systems (also called student information systems) in place, say experts. With a few clicks of the mouse (or swipes of a finger), a parent can call up her child's grades, quizzes and tests, homework assignments, attendance, and even teacher comments at any time during the school year. Many schools continue to send home paper report cards, and face-to-face conferences are still important, too, but these programs give moms, dads, and kids a way to get specific data and feedback every time the teacher updates her records, which can be anywhere from every few days to every few weeks.

Some teachers are also supplementing their school's system with other high-tech ways to keep parents in the loop. Kristen Drake, a second-grade teacher in Georgia, not only

puts assignments, schedules, and grades online, but tests and worksheets, too, which her students log on to take, either at home or on classroom computers. The students get instant feedback and parents can log on every day to check their child's latest test results. The advantage of using worksheet less.com, the online assessment system she created (and teaches other educators to use): "I think it gives more ownership to kids—students begin to see the value of their work and recognize their strengths and weaknesses," Drake says. "And parents can see right away where their child needs help."

The best way to use any type of student management system, says Drake: Instead of monitoring your child's grades and assignments by yourself, go online together as a way to jump-start a discussion. That way, you can praise your kid's progress and then point out patterns to her mistakes instead of getting overly hung up on a low score.



Say What?

The comments section gives the teacher a chance to paint a fuller picture of your child's strengths and weaknesses. Did your second-grader get a 2 in reading? The teacher may explain that with help he understands what he's reading and is better able to share his knowledge with his reading group and teacher. Sometimes a teacher will also write a description of the topics she's covering (identifying coins, say, or learning pronouns) so you can see exactly what your kid is being graded on.

Are you getting the straight scoop in the comments? Probably—most teachers take this section seriously and realize they're accountable for what they put down on paper. "At first, I was tempted to be overly diplomatic and gentle," says Elizabeth Keat, an educator in Newark, NJ. "Now I'm honest, but not harsh. I start with the positives and then list the specific skills a student is having trouble with so the parents can help him at home."

Pay attention to the length (and quality) of the comments. Keat's school uses narrative comments—a teacher writes

Oh,
Behave!

Respects others ✓
Follows directions ✓
Keeps desk neat ✓

a long, descriptive paragraph for each subject, including behavior. One- or two-line comments can mean your child's teacher isn't putting much thought into this section. But it can also mean the

teacher has to choose the few words that best describe your child's work from a preset, standardized list. This happens a lot in large, urban school districts, so be sure to ask the teacher about the school's comments policy.

Even with the skimpiest comments, you can get more feedback by asking a lot of questions. "Ask 'Is there any other information that's not reflected here that's important for me to know?'" says Keat. And if your school uses longer comments, she suggests you read them through to get the whole picture, and then go back over whatever's confusing or upsetting. Jot down your questions (or highlight what you don't understand or agree with) and take the report card with you to the conference. "The first set of grades is very important," says Guskey. "The more quickly you get in touch with the teacher, the better—that way, you can intervene before minor problems become major ones." ①

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